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The British left in European perspective, c. 1880-1914

The history of the British left before 1914 has not recently been in vogue. Although modern British political history has proven both resilient and flexible, its focus has predominantly shifted to interwar, and post-1945, periods.¹ A welcome mini-boom in work on Conservatism and the Conservative party has further drawn attention away from the study of the late Victorian and Edwardian left.² Much of the most creative writing about nineteenth-century politics has continued to delineate the character of British liberalism.³ This is not to deny that significant work has emerged, though it is perhaps indicative that one of the most important contributions builds upon essays first published in the 1990s.⁴ Indeed, the early 1990s now appear as a brief moment of efflorescence in writing about the pre-1914 British left.

Much the same could perhaps be said about comparative political history, at least as written in English. This might seem a counter-intuitive claim, given the much-trumpeted advent of global history. Leaving aside questions about just how 'global' much global history really is, the messy particularities of politics are difficult to capture in a planetary perspective. The most compelling writing in this genre concentrates on large-scale developments, such as industrialisation, empire building or nation formation, that can plausibly be presented as global in their incidence and impact.⁵ The revival of the land question, and the 'rise of socialism', can certainly be seen as multi-national, and trans-national, phenomena, though casting these as global, albeit unevenly global, 'processes', risks imposing an artificial similarity upon unruly local trajectories. At their best global histories have suggestively highlighted the millenarian strain in late-nineteenth century socialisms in part by relating these to questions of religious belief, though this argument is not unfamiliar to students of late Victorian Britain. The urge to write truly global world histories leaves limited scope for sustained comparison between polities, and - more prosaically - little room for teasing out complexity, especially if the aim is to marry the global and the total.

Global historians have attended to the connections between socialisms in different countries, especially in terms of the variegated reception of figures like Marx, Lenin and Proudhon. There is, of course, a long tradition of writing about trans-national socialist exchanges, in the

¹ On the resilience of political history in Britain, see Susan Pedersen, 'What is Political History Now?', in David Cannadine ed., *What is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), 36-57. The hegemony of the twentieth century is less clear in the writing of intellectual history.

² E. H. H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002); Alex Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in imperial London* (London, 2007); David Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age: Conservative Cultures and the Challenge of Mass Politics in early twentieth-century England* (Manchester, 2013); Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a Party: the Conservative Party in Britain, 1918-45* (Oxford, 2013); Emily Jones, *Edmund Jones and the Invention of Modern Conservatism: An Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2017).

³ Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830-1886* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁴ Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton, 2011).

⁵ C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004); Jurgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2014).

literature on socialist internationalism.⁶ Strikingly, recent histories of internationalism have been especially interested in their (often problematically) ‘liberal’ and ‘humanitarian’ underpinnings, paying, as Sam Moyn has noted, rather little attention to the cross-border socialism that exemplified ‘internationalism’ for many late nineteenth century observers.⁷ As with some species of global history, the new history of internationalism can sometimes appear as a new institutionalism in which familiar supranational organizations are revisited. The subjects of such studies are often, if not a global elite, certainly distant from the demotic and inclusive terrain of labour history. Work on the migration of ideas and policies, perhaps especially between cities, has undoubtedly deepened our sense of the interconnectedness of political actors at the close of the nineteenth century.⁸ Internationalist identities and visions on the left merit renewed attention.

It is, however, noteworthy that for all the real gains of inter- and trans-national histories these have tended not to operate comparatively. Moreover, the ambition of writing from outside the framework of the nation state does have limitations for understanding politics. The obvious importance of central government and the machinery of the state has particular relevance for making sense of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century politics on the left. Enlarged electorates and enhanced state intervention allied to developments in communications - especially growing circulations for ‘national’ newspapers - increased a sense on the left of the potential, and the dangers, of politics at the level of nation state. As Geoff Eley has noted, in much (though not all) of Europe centralised national parties were creations of the left fashioned to seek an electoral road to control of state power.⁹ The salience of the nation was, though, more deeply inscribed in mentalities on the left, as typified by Jaurés’s vision of socialism as the culmination of the revolution and the consummation of the national community. In this sense, an internationalism that in practice often emphasised fraternal dealings between national worker representatives, could often be entirely compatible with a commitment to the nation as a vessel of social justice, imbued with progressive connotations inherited from liberal nationalism. This was certainly not a universal view, but its strength on the left is a further argument for the benefits of a comparative, nationally-informed perspective.

There is, of course, a long tradition of comparative work on nineteenth century labour movements, extending back to the nineteenth century itself. Underlying assumptions about the emergence and consequence of industrial societies encouraged nineteenth century socialists to compare different countries. Canonical figures in twentieth-century labour history, perhaps most obviously Eric Hobsbawm, wrote with a European frame of reference

⁶ A recent transnational treatment of the post-1945 period is Kristian Steines, *The British Labour Party: Transnational Influences and European Community Membership, 1960-73* (Stuttgart, 2014). Classically on socialist internationalism, Georges Haupt, *Socialism and the Great War: The Collapse of the Second International* (Oxford, 1972) and *Aspects of International Socialism, 1871-1914* (Cambridge, 1986).

⁷ Sam Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

⁸ Daniel T. Rogers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

⁹ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe* (Oxford, 2002), 24.

within which comparisons came easily.¹⁰ A focus on class formation as a result of the second industrial revolution underpinned much comparative work. An emphasis upon economics was not confined to left-leaning historians; Norman Stone's much-read account of late nineteenth century Europe employed a more Schumpeterian framework but nonetheless retained a structuring role for the economy in its Dangerfield-esque portrait of pre-First World War pressures. The strains of attempting to incorporate Britain into this narrative were very evident in Stone's text, notably in the attempt to crow bar the liberal triumph of 1906 into the general thesis of continent-wide revolutionary upheaval. In seeking to subsume Britain into an overarching argument in which political Catholicism and rural-urban divisions were integral, Stone emphasised developments in Ireland, so offering an early, if problematic, effort to think comparatively about Britain as a multi-national empire, as might be expected from an expert on Hapsburg Europe.¹¹

In retrospective, Stone's textbook can be located as part of a broader flowering of comparative history in the 1980s and 1990s. Within labour history, these years saw considerable revisionism, often prompted by comparative perspectives, along with a significant body of more explicitly comparative work. Ross McKibbin's well-known argument about the absence of Marxism in Britain started with Sombart on the United States, and drew on Nettl's oft-cited discussion of the German SPD as a political model.¹² Gareth Stedman Jones's *Languages of Class* is usually, and rightly, discussed in terms of the emergence of linguistic approaches to history, but it clearly registered a comparative awareness evident in subsequent publications.¹³ In much of the historiography - just as it had for many in the late nineteenth century - the German SPD served as the exemplar of a properly developed socialist party duly equipped with the full range of party institutions from cycling clubs to libraries. This kind of approach tended to present the British case as peculiar, and generated various explanations of its oddity. The comparative work of the 1980s did not necessarily eschew a focus on the making of classes, but within such interpretations the diversity of class formation was much emphasised.¹⁴ The uneven character of economic development both across and within nations was repeatedly highlighted, along with a now familiar stress on the complexity of linkages between social and political change. Indeed, politics, and especially the role of the state, assumed greater prominence in depictions of the commonalities and differences amongst European labour movements, as well exemplified in Dick Geary's influential 1989 edited collection.¹⁵ Firmly emphasising the centrality of politics in shaping developments, Donald Sassoon's massive study declared Europe was 'full

¹⁰ This was a feature of almost all Hobsbawm's writing. See, for example, his *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz* (London, 1998), and perhaps most conspicuously his *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹¹ Norman Stone, *Europe Transformed 1878-1919* (London, 1983).

¹² Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Britain?', *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), 297-331; Peter Nettl, 'The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as a Political Model', *Past and Present*, 30 (1965), 65-95.

¹³ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983).

¹⁴ Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg (eds.), *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, 1986).

¹⁵ Dick Geary ed., *Labour and Socialist Movements* (London, 1989)

of special cases'.¹⁶ The important work of Duncan Tanner and Stefan Berger came out of this moment, but sought to challenge the much canvassed view of Britain as an outlier. For these writers, the liberalism of the British labour movement was overstated, while, particularly for Tanner, the prevalence of reformism on the continent had been obscured by the preoccupation with charting currents of Marxism. Both Tanner and Berger argued that meaningful commonalities - for Tanner chiefly political, for Berger more cultural - existed across European labour movements.¹⁷

Some of the protagonists in these comparative discussion of the 1980s and 1990s have continued to make significant contributions.¹⁸ Much comparative work on welfare state formation in political science makes some reference to labour history. Nonetheless, the widespread interest in and commitment to comparison evident in those earlier debates seems in short supply. The most substantial new work of the 2000s - Geoff Eley's *Forging Democracy* - came from an important participant in the discussions of the early 1980s, and can now be seen as the culmination of those debates, rather than the beginning of a new chapter. In casting the story of the left as the struggle for democracy, Eley captured the aspirations of pioneering socialists, but this framing also registered the significance of 1968 and 1989 for the late twentieth century left. *Forging Democracy* was an impressively capacious synthesis that distinguished three broad trajectories for the nineteenth-century left: those of Scandinavian and Central Europe (in which the prestige of the German SPD loomed large); Western Mediterranean (more anarchism, weaker trade unions), and South-East Europe (adversity in the face of highly authoritarian regimes). The British case was deemed a 'paradox', and as exceptional in its combination of trade union strength and socialist weakness. The resilience of British liberalism assumes its familiar role as puzzling, in part because liberalism is presented in general as inherently individualistic, in the manner of Stone's 'classical' liberals, so occluding the vitality of more communal, and inclusive forms of liberalism. *Forging Democracy* is a gloriously wide-ranging account of the history of the left, which - following the trail blazed by feminist historians in the 1970s and 1980s - integrates gender into its analysis. Here, though, as elsewhere, it is arguable that, despite the tripartite typology of European lefts, the SPD functions as a kind of ideal type that blunts understanding of less productionist and masculinist parties elsewhere.¹⁹

Forging Democracy sought to combine recognition of the importance of specifically political factors with a shaping role for the social.²⁰ The impact of the linguistic turn on political history has sometimes been overstated, but it was widely taken as a challenge to established understandings of the social frequently deployed in comparative assessments of urban and

¹⁶ Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The Western Left in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1996)

¹⁷ Duncan Tanner, 'The Development of British Socialism, 1900-1918', *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), 48-66; Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats* (Oxford, 1994).

¹⁸ Stefan Berger, 'Labour in comparative perspective', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo eds., *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), 309-40.; Stefan Berger ed., *A Companion to Nineteenth Century Europe: 1789-1914* (Oxford, 2006).

¹⁹ Eley, *Forging Democracy*, *passim*.

²⁰ Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 20.

industrial change.²¹ There is, though, no necessary contradiction between comparison and sensitivity to political language, any more than there is between comparison and more cultural approaches. If Berger's diagnosis of the centrality of 'avant-gardism' to the European left supplies an example of a more cultural analysis, then the terminology of 'labour movement' demands further scrutiny for its constitutive role in the late nineteenth century. The institutional focus of much comparative work has often taken for granted the language of 'labour movement', along with that of party, rather than treating these as complex constructions whose rich history is ripe for comparative interrogation. Likewise, while histories of socialism have increasingly acknowledged its diversity in the late nineteenth century, inherited assumptions that privilege particular forms of socialism as more rigorous and appropriate have not been fully jettisoned. Some suggestive recent work has cast early socialism as religious in origins, committed to harmony rather than virtue, distinct from the republican tradition, and correspondingly dismissive of politics. Such arguments raise significant comparative questions about late nineteenth century socialism, and especially its conception of politics.²² It is certainly true that for many on the left, socialism was a matter of remaking the self, and of living a new kind of life, though that did not necessarily equate to a dismissal of the political.²³ The intertwining of the ethical and the emotional can help explain the quarrelsome bent of a politics keen to celebrate fraternity.

It is thus clear that it is worth looking again at the late nineteenth century British left through a European mirror. Doing so requires building upon the valuable work of the 1980s and 1990s, whilst acknowledging the significance of later theoretical debates. The article starts by returning to the 1880s, and reassessing the 'socialist revival' in Britain. It focuses especially upon the early Fabians, and emphasises the centrality of ethical concerns in the metropolitan milieu from which the early Fabians emerge. It emphasises, and places in comparative perspective, the legacy of romanticism and the impact of Ireland in understanding the forms of socialist identification in the 1880s. It explores the intermingling of the scientific and the moral in socialist language, but argue this is not best seen as a yearning for harmony implying a disavowal of the political. Rather, the dictates of duty required the remaking of the self both privately and publicly. The dominant evolutionary perspective embodied a recognition of the significance of political arrangements and coloured conceptions of the future, limiting the plausibility of static utopias however attractively depicted.

The article then places the trajectory of the British left up to 1914 in comparative perspective. It explores the unusual popularity and vitality of liberalism in Britain, while recognising that republicanism in France occupied a not dissimilar place. The debate on the British left about centralised party organization was not unique, but it was the case that envy of SPD cultural institutions could coincide with localist distaste for centralised party machinery. Britain was

²¹ David Craig and James Thompson (eds.), *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2013).

²² Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Religion and the Origins of Socialism' in Ira Katznelson & Gareth Stedman Jones (eds), *Religion and the Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2010) .

²³ Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), 5-56; Kevin Manton, 'The Fellowship of the New Life: English Ethical Socialism Reconsidered', *History of Political Thought*, 24 (2003), 282-304.

unusual in the precocity with which existing parties established mass organisations in the constituencies, and in their willingness to embrace new forms of political communication.²⁴ The context of party competition was crucial in explaining the institutional form that labour politics assumed in early twentieth century Britain.

Ideologically, the relationship to liberalism does emerge as significant in the British case. This can, however, be both overstated and wrongly characterised, occluding important aspects of thinking on the British left, not least about equality, distributive justice and self-fashioning. Likewise, the imprint of doctrinal Marxism in Britain was relatively weak in Britain, but an SPD-centric approach has overly deprecated the importance of non-Marxist currents in some European labour movements. The role of Britain, and the British left, in revisionism has long been recognised, yet the image of insular Labourism persists. The ideological complexion of the British left was more distinctive in European terms by 1914 than in the 1880s. It was, however, the legacy of the trans-war period up to the 1920s that served a more distancing function. While as Tanner noted, similar political challenges produced a degree of convergence amongst reforming socialists in Europe, the cleavages between reformers and radicals apparent elsewhere were limited in Britain by the comparative weakness of the latter.

II

In January 1886, *The Practical Socialist*, edited by the chemist and photographer Thomas Bolas, began publication. Over the course of its first year, the journal reported and reflected the lively debates amongst metropolitan socialists in a period of flux and self-questioning. *The Practical Socialist* was, at its masthead soon proclaimed, firmly committed to an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, approach to socialism. It was, though, wide-ranging in its interests, and its pages are revealing of the priorities and preoccupations of London's left, not least those of the overlapping membership of the Fabian Society and the Fellowship of the New Left.

Social justice was central to these discussions. In a variety of fora, London's socialists tested contemporary society at the bar of morality. The ethical failings of the current order were evident in the distribution of resource which offered too much to too few, and deprived the many of the just reward for their labour. In this protean phase, self-identifying socialists differed over whether strict equality was possible or desirable, and if neither, how little inequality was the goal. These conversations were charged with moral significance, and often characterised by self-reflection. In a paper on 'Personal Duty', Graham Wallas asked how much, given inequitable resource distribution, socialists should spend; he concluded that they should spend what they would spend in a fair society, excepting any additional expenditure justified and required by their social work.²⁵ The ethical superiority of the socialist creed, and the demands it imposed on its adherents, were much canvassed. There was limited enthusiasm for defining socialism in terms of particular basket of policies, or 'even with

²⁴ James Thompson, 'Pictorial Lies'? - Posters and Politics in Britain c. 1880-1914', *Past and Present*, 197(2007), 177-210.

²⁵ Graham Wallas, 'Personal Duty', *The Practical Socialist* (July 1886), 119.

collectivism itself' in the words of Sidney Webb. It was rather in a recognition of 'interdependence', as Webb put it, that the socialist faith, both scientific fact and moral judgment, found its essence.²⁶ Edith Simcox identified the ethos of socialism with co-operation contrasting this with a liberal emphasis on the free individual, while arguing both sought a strikingly moralised social good through 'the diffusion of material necessities, of intellectual culture and of moral energy, tenderness and disinterestedness'.²⁷

The ethical frame of reference both reflected and helped shape who was deemed part of the conversation. The respective merits of collectivism, positivism and anarchism were extensively addressed, and proponents of all three regularly attended the same meetings. Revealingly, aspects of these three positions were often embraced by the same individual. Writing in the first issue of *The Practical Socialist*, Charlotte Wilson was at pains to stress that anarchism was 'a theory of human development' directed towards the present rather than a utopian vision of the future.²⁸ In the mid-80s, anarchism was a real presence in Fabian Society meetings, with Annie Besant noting that 'some of you think and speak of the State as if it were an ogre'.²⁹ In observing 'I am not a positivist' by way of explaining his socialism, Sidney Webb acknowledged the credibility of positivism in these circles. In June 1886, Webb presented positivism as one of three variants of socialism, along with collectivism and anarchism. There was an evident sensitivity towards the charge, sometimes levelled by positivists, that socialism was materialistic. This was not incompatible with the argument, made by Bolas, that anarchism depended upon too optimistic a conception of human nature. The resonance of positivism's emphasis on the transition to altruism was evident in Sidney Webb's framing of 'rent' as an unfairness that altruism did not eliminate. Moral imperatives were apparent in appeals to the 'scriptural doctrine' of labour as 'sole title to wealth'.³⁰

Reformist London socialism in the mid 1880s was exploratory, and often self-critical in tone. The meaning and justifiability of 'rent', especially rent of ability, was widely canvassed. Opposition to the power of the monopolist continued to frame much of the discussion. Interest in value theory, and the impact of marginalism in the 1890s, must be understood in a context in which labouring was normatively charged; better-off socialists were acutely conscious of the relative ease of white-collar careers compared to the arduous physicality of manual work. Discussions of leisure were characterised by a recognition of its deeply uneven distribution by class and, less frequently gender, alongside an occasional struggle to elaborate a conception of leisure that was not akin to work. Urging his audience to 'remember when you plan your day's work that you are a man, and not a machine', Graham Wallas did not radiate confidence in their instinctive embrace of life's many-sidedness.³¹ While discussions of leisure often focused upon the strenuous, they expressed a view of human flourishing that went well beyond questions of the distribution of resource.

²⁶ Sidney Webb, Address to Fabian Society, *The Practical Socialist* (June 1886), 90.

²⁷ Edith Simcox, Speech to Fabian Society, *The Practical Socialist* (Feb., 1886), 34.

²⁸ Charlotte Wilson, 'Social Democracy and Anarchism', *The Practical Socialist* (Jan. 1886), 10.

²⁹ Annie Besant, *The Practical Socialist* (Jan. 1886), 13.

³⁰ Sidney Webb, 'What Socialism Is', *The Practical Socialist* (June 1886), 90-92.

³¹ Wallas, 'Personal Duty', *The Practical Socialist* (August 1886), 12.

The legacy of romanticism was visible as London socialists sought to define the good life in the 1880s and 1890s.³² William Clarke's writings appealed as much for his meditations on Wordsworth and the unity of the world as for his sharp analysis of monopoly capitalism. Clarke's idealist faith in the 'oneness of man with nature' issued in a definite rejection of materialism, but such philosophical commitments were in no way incompatible with a clear-eyed assessment of the injurious poverty.³³ A monist ethics that spiritualised reality often underpinned realistic understandings of the mechanics of inequality, albeit Clarke's was an unusually self-conscious and reflective expression of such a view.³⁴ It is in this way that the oft-noted references to reading Ruskin and Carlyle amongst early Labour MPS are best understood.

In a letter from 1884 to Henry Demarest Lloyd, Clarke reflected on Herbert Spencer's 'defence of laissez-faire', arguing that increasing limitation from the state on 'the greed of private capital' were inevitable, following the course already taken 'by the factory legislation and by the Irish land legislation'.³⁵ In an article of 1889 on Parnell, Clarke expounded the view, common in the late 1880s, that the Irish question had fundamentally disrupted the party system, and demonstrated the structuring power of property relations.³⁶ The previous year, Clarke had assessed the impact of socialism in Britain, arguing that, like Unitarianism, its influence was disproportionate to the number of its adherents. Here, again, he argued that Irish statutes had fostered socialism, and stressed, as many on the British left did, the social, as well as constitutional aspects, of Home Rule, especially with regard to the land.³⁷

For Clarke, as for others, Conservative electoral success in the 1890s, and the spectacle of the South African War, disheartened many of the hopes of the 1880s. Clarke's own ideological journey led him to an emphasis on 'the limits of collectivism'. His career encapsulates some of the problems with attempts to police the boundary between socialism and liberalism in late nineteenth century Britain. Certainly, his sense of the radicalising force of Ireland was widely shared, as were the federalist inferences he drew. The advance of socialism was, he suggested in 1888, not just compatible with but reliant upon the onward march of decentralisation: socialism required 'energetic local life'.³⁸ A sense that history authorised socialism was central to life on the left in late nineteenth century Europe. Britain was no exception. Evolutionary perspectives were very common, with co-operation often portrayed as a property of moral evolution. The currency and character of evolutionary doctrines is evident in responses to utopian writings that noted the absence of dynamism. Some sympathetic readers of *News from Nowhere* were concerned by its lack of attention to politics, and disdain for the nineteenth century, and wondered if its inhabitants were not somewhat self-satisfied.³⁹

³² Mark Bevir, 'British Socialism and American Romanticism', *English Historical Review*, 110 (1995), 878-901.

³³ William Clarke, 'England's debt to Wordsworth', in William Clarke, *William Clarke: A Collection of His Writings*, ed. H. Burrows, J. A. Hobson (London, 1908), 395.

³⁴ James Thompson, 'Democracy, monism and the common good: rethinking William Clarke's political religion', *History of European Ideas*, 38 (2012), 233-247.

³⁵ Letter from William Clarke to Henry Demarest Lloyd, 22 October, 1884.

³⁶ William Clarke, 'Charles Stewart Parnell', *New England Magazine*, 7 (1889), 190-200.

³⁷ William Clarke, 'The influence of socialism on English Politics', *Political Science Quarterly*, 4 (1888), 567.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 570.

³⁹ Percival Chubb, Review of *News from Nowhere*, *The Sower* (Oct. 1891), 4-5.

In its some forms, evolutionary socialism denied the existence of a pre-defined end point for social progress and offered agency to socialist ideas in furthering moral growth.

Greg Claeys has usefully stressed the ‘plethora’ of socialisms available in Europe during the 1880s.⁴⁰ The German and Austrian currents of ‘orthodox Marxism’ in the era of the Second International were undoubtedly influential across the continent.⁴¹ *Die Neue Zeit* freely claimed the mantle of both Marx and Darwin. Non-Marxist socialisms, however, were very much part of the ideological fermentation of the 1880s in which categories and identities were often fluid and overlapping. Attitudes to politics were at the heart of these debates. The legacy of early socialist faith in the capacity of social transformation to eliminate politics was present in these exchanges, not least amongst anarchists, or in Edward Carpenter’s evocation of loving fraternity. The radical inheritance was, though, equally available to socialists in the 1880s. As Lawrence has highlighted, the degree of political and constitutional content in the programme enunciated by the SDF in late 1884 is striking, including a legislature for Ireland, elections in the civil service, and referenda.⁴² Debate over political forms was commonplace in socialist circles in the 1880s, not least over the role and legitimacy of parties. Wholesale disavowal of the political was unusual, and not a necessary consequence of espousal of ethical socialism. Rather than embracing detachment from politics, ethical socialism could promote an earnest and exacting engagement with civic obligations. Viewing politics as an extension of morality could increase, rather than decrease, its prominence. Within socialist networks, ethics was rarely seen as purely class-bound, nor was distributive justice viewed as dispelling all ethical conflict. Relations between men and women were much discussed, within a framework of remaking self and community in which the demands of altruism often featured prominently.⁴³

The eclecticism, and inter-mingling of positions, amongst British socialists in the 1880s had parallels elsewhere. In his well-known piece on Italian Marxism, Andreucci stressed the diverse, rich and hybrid character of socialist argument; Franco Rizzi likewise remarked on the religious idiom adopted by socialist propaganda in Italy, while rightly noting that such eclecticism was a European wide phenomenon.⁴⁴ John Davis suggested that socialism in Italy was able to draw upon an anti-materialism that had been central to the discourse of the Risorgimento.⁴⁵ In France, the republican tradition similarly offered a potential repository of ‘national’ values that socialism could be seen as extending. Analogous arguments were made in Britain through languages of co-operation and association that could patriotically celebrate

⁴⁰ Gregory Claeys, ‘Non-Marxian Socialism 1815-1914’, in Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2011), 522.

⁴¹ Dick Geary, ‘The Second International’ in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*,

⁴² Jon Lawrence, ‘Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain’, *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 163-86.

⁴³ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London, 1992), 135-71.

⁴⁴ Franco Andreucci, ‘The Diffusion of Marxism in Italy during the late nineteenth century’ in Gareth Stedman Jones and Raphael Samuel eds., *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (London, 1982); Franco Rizzi, ‘Socialist propaganda in the countryside’, in Jim Obelkevitch, Raphael Samuel and Lyndal Roper eds., *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy* (London, 1987),

⁴⁵ John Davis, ‘Socialism and the WC in Italy before 1914’, in Geary ed., *Labour and Socialist Movements*, 220.

the achievements of organised labour. The moral dimension of 1880s socialism was also evident in its often critical stance towards colonialism and militarism: this was apparent in the British context in discussions of Ireland, and in French debates about empire.

The burgeoning socialist scene of late Victorian London had much in common with other European centres. More broadly, debates about the character of socialism in 1880s Britain were part of a larger European and global conversation. The persistence of politics, and the co-existence of ethical imperatives to remake society with sustained thinking about constitutional forms, was a notable feature of British discussion, though this was not without parallels elsewhere. In order to understand developments between the 1880s and the First World War, the institutional, and political, situation of the British left needs to be considered in comparative terms. The particular, and in some ways distinctive, nature of British political culture had significant consequences for the trajectory of the British left up to the First World War. This is not, though, a story of parochial Labourism. The resilience of British liberalism was undoubtedly important, both in terms of its capacity for ideological reinvention, and for its populist energies, but this should not lead to dismissals of the significance of early Labour's political thinking.

III

The traditional view of the Edwardian labour party emphasised its moderation, and was often coloured by Ramsay MacDonald's subsequent career. It has been common to compare Labour unfavourably to more radical parties elsewhere in Europe, and especially to bemoan its lack of theoretical sophistication, and the inadequacy of its engagement with Marxism. In its more polemical forms, this approach sees the party as a unimaginative amalgam of Lib-Lab trade unionists, and soft-headed middle class ethical socialists.

This conception has undoubtedly been significantly displaced over the last thirty years. The initial impulse was an emphasis - classically embodied in McKibbin's essay on the lack of Marxism in Britain - upon the fit between the forms of left-wing politics in Britain, and the 'underlying' pattern of economic and social development. In this view, it was precisely the relative success of organised labour in winning gains, and the currency of shared understandings of constitutionality and fairness, that explained the particular character of labour politics in Britain. Subsequent work, especially in the 1990s, laid greater emphasis upon the diverse experiences of workers, and the blurred boundary between skilled manual workers and the occupationally lower middle class in swathes of urban Britain.

The focus upon 'currents of radicalism' evident in much of this later writing could mask interpretative differences.⁴⁶ Some variants stressed commonalities between radicalisms; others concentrated more on differences and tensions. Attitudes to the state were central to this revisionism, with much attention given to a preference for local over central solutions, and a widespread desire for the state to work in harness with the institutions of civil society. Recognition of the strength of free trade in British political culture was accompanied by

⁴⁶ Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid, *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991)

debate over the extent to which the left sought to privilege producer interests, and how far those who did seek to speak for the consumer had an agenda distinct from that of populist liberal free traders. In the historiography of the 90s there emerged - sometimes more implicit than explicit - a group portrait of socialists for whom the role of the central state was a question of debate, and for whom the state was not necessarily privileged over, or antithetical to, the local and the associational. Whilst some recent work has given additional attention to craft unionism and to non-statist ideas on the left, the shift in historiographical interest towards later periods has left our picture of the pre-1914 period unclear.⁴⁷ The implications of the historiography of the 1990s remain under-developed.

As in much of Europe, many on the British left were imprecise about what a future socialist polity would look like. This observation applies across a range of socialisms, almost regardless of their relationship to Marxism. Socialists in Britain, and elsewhere, sometimes employed the transformative and basal nature of the coming change to argue that a detailed specification of post-transitional arrangements was neither possible nor desirable. As already noted, an evolutionary disposition militated against offering a fixed blueprint for the socialist future. This could lead to an elevation of tendencies and practices over abstraction that paralleled, or echoed, Whiggish celebrations of national character. Such rhetoric could be tactical, but it was not necessarily so, nor was it necessarily unsophisticated.

Invocation of public ownership well exemplifies the character and complexities of Edwardian debates. As has been oft noted, public ownership has been justified in a variety of forms, and in a variety of ways on the left. The presumption remains, though, that nationalisation under state control on productionist grounds was the default position. It is the case that arguments for public ownership noted the privations suffered by workers, and the value lost to the community, through capitalist ownership. For some industries, such as railways, the advantages of nationalisation and integrated planning were strongly espoused. It was, however, also the case that municipal models of ownership were often seen as more appropriate for some industries. Within the Labour party, there was an effort to articulate a socialist case for public ownership that recognised the costs to the consumer of monopolies. This responded to a broader sense, apparent on the political right as well as the left, of the distortions and unfairness wrought by concentrations of market power, often expressed as denunciations of 'trusts'. However sketchy some of the detail, it is necessary to take seriously the forms which advocacy of non-capitalist ownership in Labour thinking took, and the frequency with which this was framed in terms of the supremacy of 'cooperation' over 'competition'.⁴⁸ It is notable that in the British case intellectual figures on the left of liberalism, such as Hobhouse and Hobson, incorporated a significant role for public ownership in their writings. This was not, of course, fully reflected in legislation, but it is nonetheless revealing. Argument on the left was importantly shaped by the relatively porous

⁴⁷ Alastair J. Reid, *The Tide of Democracy: Shipyard Workers and Social Relations in Britain 1870-1950* (Manchester, 2010).

⁴⁸ James Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of 'Public Opinion', 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 2013), 218-43; James Thompson, 'Political Economy, the Labour Movement and the Minimum Wage 1880-1914', in E. H. H. Green and Duncan Tanner (eds.), *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate* (Cambridge, 2007), 62-89.

relationship between ‘liberalism’ and ‘socialism’, and the greater radicalism of at least part of British liberalism relative to much of continental Europe.

The centrality of demands for the 10 hour day to socialist campaigning across Europe in the 1880s is well known. Socialists highlighted the plight of the unemployed, and contributed to the increasing acknowledgement of unemployment as a distinct economic phenomenon traceable in Britain through the press in the 1880s and 1890s.⁴⁹ The ‘right to work’ has long been seen as a central element in Labour’s parliamentary interventions before 1914, as well as in the wider labour movement. The two were connected for some through a static conception of a finite stock of required labour that should be more evenly spread across the pool of workers. Ethical considerations were inextricably bound up with economic arguments. Work was valued as a source of independence and dignity, in ways that were explicitly gendered, as of course was Labour politics more broadly; Will Crooks summarised Labour’s programme as ‘to make manly men’. As Eley and Berger have rightly stressed, masculinist associational cultures, and espousals household economy centred on the male breadwinner, were frequently to be found amongst European lefts. Reducing working hours were a preservative for health, but also a means to enable leisure, albeit often, though not invariably, of a self- and other-improving sort. As Noel Whiteside argues, it was a vision of shared, communal consumption that commanded greatest adherence on the British left.⁵⁰ This was evident, for instance, in the celebration of parks and green spaces by progressives and socialists in Edwardian local elections.

How does debate on the British left before 1914 appear compared to other European societies? The currency of free trade, and the willingness of some British socialists to engage with questions of consumption, is notable. While the labour movement’s relationship to British feminism was compromised and complex, there was important confluence between socialism and feminism in Britain. Arguably, ambivalence about the political virtues of centralised party organisation before 1914 fostered a less closed culture, not least on matters of gender, than within the SPD, and its imitators. In many respects, Britain preserved more of the ideological variety of the 1880s than was typical in much of central and Eastern Europe. Its trajectory is closer to that of the French left, as suggested by Ramsay MacDonald’s editor’s note to Mildred Minturn’s translation of Jaurés’s *Studies in Socialism* where he suggested that the British labour movement must develop ‘on the lines of these essays’, and cautioned against viewing continental trends with ‘reddened spectacles’.⁵¹

Stefan Berger’s emphasis upon socialism as an educational movement devoted to raising ‘workers to become better human beings’ draws out well much that united the British left with its continental counterparts. As was argued in the previous section, this didacticism was not confined to communally-orientated ethical socialists in Britain, nor did it preclude serious engagement with the politics, and the state. The reforming aspiration of many British

⁴⁹ Jose Harris, *Unemployment and Politics: A Study in English Social Policy 1886-1914* (Oxford, 1972); Jose Harris, *William Beveridge: A Biography* (Oxford, 1977).

⁵⁰ Noel Whiteside, *Social Opulence and Private Restraint: The Consumer in British Socialist Thought since 1800* (Oxford, 2015).

⁵¹ Jean Jaurés, *Studies in Socialism* (London, 1906), xiv-xv.

socialists towards popular culture fully matched those of many within, say, the SPD. These were often deeply inscribed within narrative arcs of political autobiographies, though Will Thorne departed from this script with his palpable pride in his street fighting years⁵². Religion could underpin such attitudes, or service to the movement itself assume a quasi-religious purpose. The rhetoric of the 'movement' ubiquitous on the British left distilled a complex set of beliefs around being on the right side of history, solidarity, and political/cultural transformation. The language of movement was widespread in Europe, though the strength of trade unionism in Britain, and the relative weakness of socialist party organization, gave it particular force. As work on the first world war has amply demonstrated, labour patriotism was an extensive phenomenon across Europe. In this context, it is the strength of pacifism within liberalism in Britain that stands out comparatively.

European comparisons aid understanding of the trajectory of the British left up to, and beyond, 1914. Historians have noted the relatively peaceable policing of industrial disputes in Britain, without neglecting the violence that Keir Hardie highlighted in his electoral addresses. The capaciousness and flexibility of liberal traditions in Britain has been rightly recognised, as has the Liberal party's capacity for populist self-projection. The latter deserves, however, greater attention, as work on pre-war political communication suggests. It is the challenging context of party competition that is perhaps most distinctive, given the emphasis in recent work on the Conservative party's creative response to mass politics before and after the First World War. The combination and intermingling of Catholicism and nationalism in Ireland displaced both liberal and labour politics, while exposing the importance of Unionism and Protestantism on the British right. This pattern has echoes elsewhere, as does the enthusiasm for 'Home Rule' across a multi-national polity on the left, though the latter again indicates the persistence of constitutional motifs, and devolving preferences, in the British case.

IV.

This article has sought to assess the health of comparative histories of the left, and to revisit the character and culture of the British left before 1914 in a European mirror. It has argued for the enduring value of comparison, and of a European frame of reference, without seeking to dismiss the importance and insights of connected, transnational and global intellectual histories. It has not aimed to deny that there were distinctive aspects of British developments, but rather has sought to reveal these more clearly, as well as identifying commonalities, by revisiting and extending previous work. British socialisms of the 1880s emerge as comparable, especially in London, with the ideological ferment elsewhere. The resilience of political thinking within British socialist thought, and its compatibility with a pronounced ethical slant, is apparent. Some familiar themes, such as the relatively weak impress of formal doctrine Marxism are evident in the British case, though this needs viewing through a lens that recognises a broader European eclecticism and avoids SPD-centrism. It is the persistence over time of this ideological diversity that appears more distinctive, along with a less centralised party structure prior to the First World War. The power and flexibility of

⁵² Will Thorne, *My Life's Battles* (London, 1925).

established political parties, along with relatively high levels of elite constitutionalism outside Ireland, contributed to the limited support for more radical variants of socialism and the limited inroads made by nascent Labour party prior to 1914. In its movement rhetoric, its cultural preferences, in its self-image and its imagery, the British left had much in common with reformist parties abroad. It was, arguably, the achievements of patriotic labour reformism in the First World War, and the ideologically disparate sources of opposition to war, that created the conditions for the interwar breakthrough of a nationally-orientated, moderately socialist Labour party. It was in this avoidance of the devastating divisions between radicals and reformists on the left wrought by the war that Britain was to prove most consequentially distinctive.